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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: UNITY PARTY GAINS SENATE SEAT IN GBARPOLU
BY-ELECTION

REF: MONROVIA 1417

1. (U) SUMMARY. The Unity Party has gained a Senate seat following candidate J.S.B. Theodore Momo's win in the December 18 Gbarpolu County by-election, President Sirleaf's party now has six seats in the 30 member Senate. Two Embassy teams, along with UNMIL and several NGOs, observed the second round and found that the election was as impressively well run as round one was on December 4 (reftel). Voter turnout was 35.2%, just under the 36% reported in round one. The National Elections Commission resolved the problem in the first round of some polling stations having too few ballots for their number of registered voters. The election used the 2005 election voting rosters; therefore voters who were not eligible to vote in the 2005 Presidential election had no possibility to register for this election. With the large number of war-displaced people who have returned to Gbarpolu County and those who have turned 18 since 2005, some NGOs estimate that more than half of the adult population was unable to vote. The Unity Party spent heavily in the election, but observers were unable to corroborate opposition parties' assertions that government resources were used on behalf of the party. END SUMMARY.

MOMO WINS, TURNOUT HELD FOR SECOND ROUND

2. (U) Two Embassy teams observed the December 18 second round of the Gbarpolu County by-election between Unity Party candidate J.S.B. Theodore Momo and independent candidate Armour Kanie Wesso. Momo won the seat with 70.5% of the vote while Wesso took 29.5%. Voter turn-out was 35.2% (near to the 36% reported in the first round).

ANOTHER IMPRESSIVELY WELL RUN ELECTION

3. (U) Just as with the December 4 round one election, Embassy teams visited 27 out of 90 polling stations and were impressed at how smoothly and transparently the election was run. They observed that all polls were fully staffed with trained election personnel. LNP officers kept the lines orderly and showed no signs of interfering in the process. Voters at all polling stations had the left corner of their voter ID card cut off and their thumbnail dyed as they voted to prevent them from voting again. Vote counting was done systematically at each site immediately following the poll closure and the tally sheets were turned into the NEC. Candidate representatives monitoring the polling sites told the Embassy teams they were very satisfied with how closely election procedures were being followed. All sites the teams visited opened within ten minutes of the 8:00 AM start time and closed on time at 6:00 PM. The NEC appeared to have addressed the problem in the first round of a potential shortage of ballots (reftel) by increasing the frequency of supervisory visits to all polling stations. Supervisors carried extra ballots in their cars and were on call to

respond to any shortage. There were no reports of any actual shortages of ballots.

2005 VOTER REGISTRATION LISTS USED

¶4. (U) NEC Co-Chairman Elizabeth J. Nelson told EmbOffs that she considered it unfair to hold the by-election using voter registration lists that had not been updated since before the 2005 Presidential Election, disfranchising all persons who have turned 18 since 2005, whereas no one who has left the county or died since 2005 has been removed from the list. She noted that Gbarpolu County was particularly hard hit during the war and had one of the highest percentages of displaced persons in the whole country, and many of those people have returned home since 2005. (Note: It is difficult to assess how many of these are still registered in other counties. End note.) IFES and IRI observers estimated that up to half of the County's adult population was systematically excluded from the election because they could not register. (Note: Lack of current census data makes this impossible to verify. End note.)

¶5. (SBU) Nelson said she felt so strongly about the need to open registration in Gbarpolu County, she added USD 5 million to the budget request simply to open the list. Her request, however, was denied as the GOL wanted to start re-registration of all voters nationwide following the upcoming boundary harmonization exercise for local municipalities and counties. She also said that NEC frankly could not afford the USD 5 million for open registration for this by-election because it would then set the precedent of the need to pay for it for all future by-elections.

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CAMPAIGNING MADE A DIFFERENCE: CASH, T-SHIRTS, RICE, AND RIDES

¶6. (U) Momo's victory was greatly helped by the campaigning efforts of President Sirleaf and other Unity Party officials in Gbarpolu County. Sirleaf visited a few campaign sites near the county capital Bopolu on December 16. The treacherous dirt road between Monrovia and Bopolu had been substantially improved prior to her arrival. Her security detail told us that she was passing out 20 Liberian dollar bills (33 U.S. cents), Momo T-shirts, and bags of rice at all the campaign stops. EmbOffs observed several buses of voters being transported from Monrovia, reportedly financed by Unity Party, in order to vote in their home county of Gbarpolu.

¶7. (U) Independent candidate Wesso could not afford even to hire representatives to monitor all of the polling stations and had few, if any, campaign goodies to distribute. He did, however, walk the northern half of Gbarpolu County (most of which is inaccessible to vehicles) and appealed to voters there with a message of "I came here. They didn't. Who do you think will represent your interests better?" Voters in the North responded well by solidly supporting Wesso but they were outvoted by the more densely populated South.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: Not all NGO observers believed that the lack of open registration period stemmed only from budgetary issues but rather a Unity Party effort to have the GOL postpone new voter registrations for its own political gain, in that the rural villagers, Wesso's base, were the ones that were most likely displaced by the war. All NGOs agreed, however, that the NEC had conducted an open, transparent, free, and fair election with all the resources it could. We have heard several complaints from the opposition that the Unity Party used GOL resources in running the campaign, but we have not to seen any concrete evidence of this practice.

Booth